

MARRIAGE PREPARATION IN THE LARGER FRAMEWORK OF MARRIAGE FORMATION

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All the presenters were asked to consider: “What are the key dimensions of marriage preparation as we currently practice it and why are they important?” We heard about the importance of having married couples as well as clergy be part of the marriage preparation process and I couldn’t agree more. We discussed how inventories can assist couples to make even better decisions about their relationship. We heard ways to integrate Natural Family Planning into marriage preparation. We learned what is happening specifically in the Hispanic community. All of this is very important and necessary as we prepare engaged couples for the holy sacrament of matrimony.

What I have been asked to address is the role of marriage preparation in the larger framework of marriage formation. I agree that in the area of marriage preparation we have much of which to be proud. The Catholic Church as a whole, and some dioceses in particular, offer an outstanding, comprehensive process to engaged couples as they prepare for their marriage. The engaged couples and the Catholic Church are better off because of this ministry. Having said that, I also believe more strongly now than ever before that we are just scratching the surface of what needs to be done to truly support the vocation of marriage. We simply are not doing enough. Let me explain.

First, we begin talking about marriage only after a couple has decided to get married. The formative time from when a child is born until he/she becomes engaged, which is typically in the mid to late twenties, is a veritable desert. Individuals are bombarded with society’s views on marriage. Magazines, billboards, television and movies inundate impressionable minds that marriage is not necessary, that when it comes to sex if it feels good do it and that the way to have a good marriage is to spend the most money on your wedding. In any case, according to Hollywood, no one stays married.

Despite the fact that some children are raised in intact families and a small minority of children receive the benefit of a Catholic education, we lose the battle for forming and shaping what young people think about marriage. In Bernard Goldberg’s 2005 book, “100 People Who Are Screwing Up America,” he includes the white rapper Eminem. Why? Because of the huge influence he is having on young people. According to Goldberg, if you google Eminem there are over 13,000,000 hits. That is more than for Abraham Lincoln, Christopher Columbus, Jonas Salk, Osama bin Laden, Adolph Hitler, Elvis Presley, Frank Sinatra and Princess Diana. Like so many gangster rappers he is vulgar and disgusting, but he has a huge impact on today’s youngsters by spreading his destructive message. In his world, all women are whores whom he would like to rape or kill. That’s the kind of disgusting message that our teens and even pre-teens are being exposed to. That’s the kind of message they hear when they are 12, 15, 18, 20 and 25 years old.

When a couple gets engaged, our best parishes and dioceses welcome, encourage, and support them. Sometimes, however, they cannot get married because they are not registered in

the parish. They may be judged harshly because they are living together, or they go through a minimal process that leaves them confused, angry, and determined to never step into a Catholic Church again after the wedding. After they are married there is little support for them until they decide to have children and send them to a Catholic school. Just ask the persons in charge of Young Adult Ministry if young adults feel supported by the Catholic Church.

Marriage preparation, as well done as it is in many places, is not enough to overcome society's influences, but it is better than what is done prior to and after the time of engagement.

To take full advantage of the time of engagement we need to do much more, long before an individual chooses marriage. As a Church we need to value marriage enough that we put our money where our pastoral letters are. We need to address the lifelong influences that shape attitudes and present learning experiences that affect Christian marriage.

Imagine with me for a moment if we really made a commitment to support marriage. Imagine that for the past 33 years the Catholic Church in the United States held a rally, let's call it the annual March for Marriage, in Washington, D. C., to let our political leaders and all our fellow citizens know how much we value the sacrament of matrimony. Imagine if many of our Cardinals and Bishops made this event a priority and went to Washington to lead this gathering of those who support marriage. Imagine bringing busloads of our youth and young adults who have been taught about the importance of marriage in their home parishes. They would come to this gathering to be further inspired.

Imagine if all priests and deacons preached about the sanctity of marriage on a particular Sunday each year, if we had a pro-marriage month, if our Catholic diocesan newspapers covered pro-marriage activities and events, and if budgets in Family Life Offices around the country were increased so they could offer more comprehensive marriage ministry.

I believe we would have much better success with our most important life and social issues if children learned these beliefs and values at home in a strong family that has as its foundation a healthy marriage. I envision the day when no Catholic would ever consider abortion, not because it's against the law, but because that they know it is wrong, something they learned from their parents and their Church. In many respects, we keep bailing water out of the boat without fixing the leak.

We are losing too many of our Catholic children, who some day will have to decide whether to get married in the Catholic Church or not, even before we have much of a chance to evangelize and catechize them. Fr. Mike Ahlstrom, Vicar for the Diaconate Community in Chicago, wrote in the November 2005 Deacons newsletter, "About one fourth of babies baptized in the Archdiocese of Chicago will never make their First Communion, and about half will never be confirmed. Even less will be married in church. Of our registered Catholics, 75% are missing on any Sunday; only a third go with some regularity and about half go on Easter and Christmas." The need to support Catholic families by supporting their Catholic marriages is obvious.

To begin addressing the need to more comprehensively support Catholic marriages in Chicago, this past July we implemented new Guidelines. Like most dioceses we had Pastoral

Guidelines for Marriage Preparation. After extensive consultations with the clergy, married couples, formerly married individuals and pastoral staffs we did away with our Marriage Preparation Guidelines.

We now have Guidelines for Pastoral Outreach to Christian Marriage: Formation, Preparation, Celebration and Continuing Education. We no longer have Marriage Preparation Guidelines because we realized that to support marriage we needed to do more. We couldn't continue to focus only on preparation when there was so much more that needed to be done. Each of the four sections offers distinct opportunities for the Church to evangelize and catechize on the Sacrament of Matrimony. This effort starts at birth and continues throughout life.

We shared with Cardinal George that we wanted to change the culture of dysfunction and divorce to a culture that truly supports marriage, and he was very supportive, even as we all realized how difficult it is to change culture.

In each of the four sections--Formation, Preparation, Celebration and Continuing Education--we outline what the Catholic faith teaches as well as the responsibilities of the Archdiocese, the parish, and the couple.

Certainly a piece of paper, a document, will have no impact unless it is read, accepted and integrated into pastoral practice. That's the first culture we needed to change. To that end we are in the process of visiting 100 parishes over the next three months to see how our office can assist them as they implement the Guidelines. Then, we will continue these visits until we have been to every parish in the diocese.

Concerning the time of engagement and the early years of marriage, we have put together a ten step process to assist couples as they prepare for marriage and then begin their lives together. Each couple receives the booklet, "How to get Married in the Archdiocese of Chicago" that goes into some detail to explain the Ten Steps. This workbook includes use of the FOCCUS instrument, an NFP introductory class and continuing education workshops in the first year of marriage. We in Chicago are thankful for the excellent work of Sister Barbara Markey and the Omaha Family Life Office for FOCCUS and we are thankful to Donna Dausman from Springfield, Illinois, for her work on integrating NFP into marriage preparation programs.

The newly married workshops deal with topics such as expectations, adjustments, time, sex, money and faith. Faith and life skills are both necessary for a healthy Catholic marriage. Those who think we should just teach one without the other are wrong.

Each couple who attends a diocesan marriage preparation program also receives a CD by Dr. Jim Healy, a Marriage Moments perpetual calendar that we developed, a monthly e-newsletter that goes to over 12,000 newly married couples each month, and a one year subscription to our most recent initiative, a Catholic Couples Edition of Christianity Today's Marriage Partnership magazine. We provide our newly married couples with a variety of resources, all relevant to their stage of married life and all grounded in our Catholic faith.

Why are we spending so much on after the wedding? Because the research talks about the limited shelf life of marriage preparation programs. Because people such as the marriage enrichment pioneers Drs. David and Vera Mace said in the 1960's that they believed marriage preparation was only as good as the follow-up marriage enrichment. Because we thought if we said supporting newly married couples was important we had better prove it.

And we have much, much more to do. I have come to believe there is no magic bullet, no single program or resource that will meet the needs of all of our engaged and married couples. We need a variety of well thought out and planned resources and programs that we can deliver in a multitude of ways long before an individual becomes engaged, as well as to the engaged and married couples. If we are not on the internet, not interactive, not up to date we will not be relevant despite the richness and fullness of our Catholic Teaching.

We need to teach parents so they can teach their children. We need to provide programs like "How To Avoid Marrying A Jerk" in every Catholic high school and university to help teens and young adults make better decisions about whom they want to marry. I believe we could dramatically reduce the divorce rate if every couple getting married in our Catholic parishes had a mentor couple assigned to them who would walk with them as they begin their married life together. And, it would have the additional benefit of strengthening the mentor couple's marriage at the same time.

Retrouvaille and The Third Option should not only be available in every diocese but should be publicized so hurting couples know that divorce is not the only path. And if we really wanted to support marriage, we would assist our divorced brothers and sisters through the annulment process so that when they choose to remarry, and most of them do, we wouldn't be losing 90% of them and probably almost 100% of their children. If Sam Walton ever heard that WalMart was losing 90% of its customers, significant changes would be made.

We need to walk with and understand the issues our married couples are dealing with and we need to be excellent teachers to get our message across. We can judge for ourselves how well we are doing by seeing if anyone is impacted by our message. We are only teachers if people are learning.

Conservatively, I have read through over 400,000 evaluations filled out by the engaged. I know from those evaluations and from my conversations with other Family Life Directors over the years that the Catholic Church is by and large doing a fine job when it comes to marriage preparation. I believe we need to concentrate on the formation that should be occurring in our schools and homes long before a decision to marry is made and then throughout all the stages of married life.

For me, a key dimension of marriage preparation is the limited time it is offered and its limited impact. We need to make the same commitment during the early formative years, the newly married years, and during the various stages of marriage that we have done for marriage preparation. We need to expand our work and build on the strong foundation of marriage preparation.

